**The Valley of the Shadow of Death**

Text: Psalm 23:4

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Psalm 23; Matthew 26:36-39; 2 Cor 4:7-18

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 466, 88, 507, 184, 525

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#8)

**Theme:** The Christian is able to pass through the dark nights of the soul without fear because the Lord, the Good Shepherd, is always with His beloved children to guide, protect, provide and comfort.

**Proposition:** The Lord comforts the Christian pilgrim through the darkest pathways of life

**Introduction**

Earlier this year, affected by Long Covid, I experienced some of the darkest moments of my entire life during long nights when I couldn’t sleep, and my rampant thoughts repeatedly ravaged my mind. More than physical suffering, it was mental, emotional and spiritual anguish that afflicted me. I felt very vulnerable, weak, isolated and profoundly sad. Even now, I cannot find words sufficient to describe my deep despair in what Psalm 91 describes as the ‘*terror of the night*’ (Ps 91:5). It truly seemed back then that ‘*darkness was my only companion*’ (Ps 88:18).

Although at the time it felt to me as though I was alone, mine was not a unique experience. We know from Scripture that some of God’s children, do at times go through what may be described in the words of Psalm 23:4 as ‘*the valley of the shadow of death*’. We meet many people in the Bible who have suffered from what could be broadly described under the term ‘depression’, for example:

* Elijah (1 Kings 19:4) ‘*he asked that he might die*’
* Jonah (4:8) "*It is better for me to die than to live*"
* David (Ps 32:3) “*when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long*”
* Apostle Paul (2 Cor 1:8-10) ‘*we despaired of life itself*’
* Jesus (Matt 26:38) “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*”

As we’ve already noted in this sermon series, The Pilgrims Progress is an allegory of the Christian life. It is also an autobiographical work describing author John Bunyan’s own personal experience of his Christian walk. The Pilgrims Progress was mostly conceived and written during the long periods of Bunyan’s imprisonment. In The Pilgrims Progress we meet one of the heroes of the story, a man named ‘Faithful’. Having passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Christian asks Faithful about his experience in that place. Faithful replies ‘*I had sunshine all the rest of the way through…and also through the Valley of the Shadow of Death*’. For the man Faithful, the Valley of the Shadow of Death was not so difficult, but for Christian it was a place of terror.

Not every Christian experiences the stubborn darkness of depression, but some do. You may be such a one, or you may not. We are not all the same and we do not all experience the Christian life in the same ways. However, whatever the particular journey that the Lord leads each one of us on, it is true that the Lord comforts the Christian pilgrim through the darkest pathways of life. I do not wish the dark experience of the Valley of the Shadow of Death on anyone, but I pray that this message will be helpful to us all in these ways:

* To comfort those currently experiencing spiritual depression
* To equip us all for the future possibility of such trials
* To grow us in comprehension of what other pilgrims may experience so that we can better minister to them with grace, understanding, compassion and loving kindness

Our focus this morning is on the 4th verse of Psalm 23: “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*”. There are three points this morning:

1. The darkness
2. The fear
3. The comfort
4. **The darkness**

Who was the first human shepherd? Adam’s son Abel, ‘a keeper of sheep’ (Gen 4:2). Shepherding was the main occupation of the nomadic Israelites in the early days of the patriarchs. Think of Abraham (Gen 12:16); Rachael (Gen 29:9); Jacob (Gen 30:31-40), and also Moses (Ex 3:1). As the cultivation of crops developed, shepherding sheep was seen as a menial task for younger sons, hired servants and slaves. Before he was a king, David was a shepherd boy (1 Sam 16:11). In Scripture, the term ‘shepherd’ came to refer, not only to those who herded sheep, but also to kings who protected, guided and provided for their subjects (2 Sam 5:2).

In Psalm 23, David writes that ‘*The LORD is my shepherd*’. King David, Israel’s shepherd ruler, declares that he is guided, protected and provided for by his Sovereign; the covenant God of the shepherds of old; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. During his life, David knew times of plenty and periods of peace; poetically expressed in the simple pleasures of a sheep: “*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters*” (Ps 23:2).

David also experienced times of deep distress that he likens to being like a sheep being led through a deep ravine with steep sides that keep out the light. Our text, from Psalm 23:4 is very well known, often being recited at funerals: **“***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*”. The Hebrew word translated ‘shadow of death’ literally means ‘darkness’ or ‘dark shadows’. It contains the same root as the word for death, which explains why many Bible translators have rendered this word ‘shadow of death’.

The gloom of this valley is expressed by John Bunyan in The Pilgrim’s Progress as he quotes from Jeremiah 2:6: A ‘*wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells*'. This valley is a solitary place, and it is unavoidable for pilgrims as Bunyan explains: “*Christian must needs go through it, because the way to the Celestial City lay through the midst of it*”.

Christian had just had a terrifying encounter with the ‘foul fiend’ Apollyon, representing Satan. Bunyan writes ‘*in this combat no man can imagine, unless he had seen and heard as I did, what yelling and hideous roaring Apollyon made all the time of the fight; he spoke like a dragon. It was the dreadfulest sight that ever I saw*’. Christian had suffered multiple wounds in the battle with his enemy, growing weaker and weaker and almost losing his life, but then, at the last wounding Apollyon with his sword and thereby winning the fight.

It is worth carefully noting that this next scene follows on directly from the last one, with but a brief refreshment break in between. Sometimes in life, one trial follows almost immediately upon another. It can feel like you are floundering in a stormy sea, coming up for air after one wave has crashed over you only to be pummelled by another barely before you can take a gulp of oxygen before going under again.

Bunyan writes of the Pilgrim’s trauma in the Valley of the Shadow of Death that ‘*now here Christian was* ***worse put to it*** *than in his fight with Apollyon*’. Did you hear that? The dark shadows of this valley were **more difficult** for Christian than the spiritual battle with the Evil One had been before. For John Bunyan, reflecting his own personal experience, The Valley of the Shadow of death represents spiritual depression, despair and despondency. In the older English language this was often referred to by the umbrella term ‘melancholy’ – ‘*a feeling of pensive sadness*’ – ‘*being overcome in sorrow, wrapped up in gloomy thoughts*’.

We could reasonably describe Christ’s personal experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, as His passing through the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’. There ‘*he began to be sorrowful and troubled*’ (Matt 26:37). He said, ‘*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*’ (38). The Greek word translated ‘sorrowful’ refers to ‘*pain which causes severe mental and emotional distress*’. The Greek word translated ‘troubled’ describes the ‘*confused, chaotic, heavy state of restlessness that results from a time of turmoil or great trauma*’. Jesus intensifies His description of the internal torment when He says, ‘*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*’.

Children, I hope and pray that you never experience the internal darkness of soul that David describes in Psalm 23 and that many faithful Christians like Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon and Joni Eareckson Tada have suffered. But, **if** you do, remember that you are not alone in this dark night of the soul – others have suffered this torment. Remember, first and foremost, that Jesus endured more than we ever will – faced with the prospect of the cross before Him as he anticipated the way ahead in the deepest sorrow of soul.

John Bunyan writes that “*when Christian had travelled in this disconsolate condition for some considerable time, he thought he heard the voice of a man, as going before him, saying* ‘*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me’”.* Christian had **felt** alone in the dark valley, but later he realised that others were in the same condition as him. There was another man there in the dark valley. Depression is very isolating, but this most painful of internal afflictions is more widespread amongst our society and church community than we generally think. Depression is often associated with anxiety and fear, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The fear**

As Christian comes to the ‘borders of the Shadow of Death’ he sees two fearful men who explained that the Valley was ‘as dark as pitch’. They explain that in this valley are ‘hobgoblins, satyrs, and dragons of the pit’. The valley was a noisy terrifying place where there was ‘*a continual howling and yelling, as of a people under unutterable misery, who there sat bound in affliction and irons*’. The two fearful men were running back to the City of Destruction, full of terror (cf. just as most of the spies who returned from scouting out the Promised land had been (Num 13:32) saying that it was ‘*a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height*’).

Fear can be paralysing, preventing people like you and me from moving forward in trust and continuing to rely on God’s promises. Christian, in The Pilgrim’s Progress, *‘went on his way but still with his sword drawn in his hand; for fear lest he should be assaulted*’. The pathway was ‘exceedingly narrow’ and very difficult to navigate in the darkness. There was a ‘very deep ditch’ on the right side and a ‘very dangerous quag’ on the left. ‘Quag’ is a Victorian era English word meaning ‘a marshy or boggy place’.

The valley was a place where the mind was afflicted. ‘*Over that valley hang the discouraging clouds of confusion*’. Bunyan writes that “*Christian was so confounded, that he did not know his own voice….one of the wicked ones got behind him, and stepping up softly to him, and whisperingly suggested many grievous blasphemies to him, which he thought had proceeded from his own mind.* Christian seems to have lost control of his own mind. He travelled in ‘*this disconsolate condition for some considerable time*’. Here Bunyan is describing inward terrors of the soul, not external conflicts, as with the battle against Apollyon.

Some people say things like ‘real Christians do not get depressed’. That is wrong. There are many myths and misconceptions related to depression, especially amongst Christians, including:

* **It is a result of a lack of willpower**. Pastoral counsel from people who think this may be along the lines of ‘chin up’, ‘get a grip on yourself’, ‘just take a concrete pill and harden up!’. Some who pride themselves on their own self-sufficiency may have difficulty acknowledging personal weakness. In his humility, the Apostle Paul had no such impediment (e.g. 2 Cor 11:30).
* **Depression is due to unconfessed sin**. This may sometimes be the case, but by no means always. Depressed Christians are sometimes so painfully aware of their sins that this is all they can focus on, and they are unable to hear the reassurance of grace. Depression can often produce a feeling of guilt, even without any basis in reality. At times, depression can distort a person’s thoughts so much that Christians may even become delusional about their sinfulness. In these cases, depression is not a product of sin.
* **Depression is just exaggerated self-pity**. The underlying idea here is that a person’s grief is out of proportion to their loss. Depression is complex. What may not amount to much of a loss for one person, may be devastating for another. This may be due to an individual’s values, previous losses they have experienced in the past, or a genetic disposition that renders them more sensitive than others.
* **Depression is just due to a chemical imbalance**. Whilst there may be physical causes and influences for depression, there are often other phycological and spiritual factors. The Lord has designed us as complex beings and the fall similarly affects us in complex and varied ways. Some people’s brains can be ‘wired for depression’ by factors including genetic predisposition, past traumatic events, negative thought patterns, and spiritual beliefs.
* **Depression is due to a lack of faith.** Some Christians often erroneously believe that if a person is walking closely with God, he or she should not be depressed. Instead, they say, a person should be confident in God’s goodness, experience hope and joy, and trust God whatever the circumstances. There is sometimes the belief that a spiritually mature person should be stoic, unperturbed to adverse life circumstances, and somehow largely immune to suffering.

Charles Spurgeon offers this critique to those who would judge the depressed as lacking in faith: “*There are a great many of you who appear to have a large stock of faith, but it is only because you are in very good health and your business is prospering. If you happened to get a disordered liver, or your business should fail, I should not be surprised if nine parts out of ten of your wonderful faith should evaporate*.”

Depression can be described as a state of inward fear – fear of what is not seen, of what is not known, or of what is thought to be true, but is actually often false. Depression often leads to fearful self-doubt, chronic self-loathing and for the Christian, gnawing questioning about God’s love, care and even His very existence. David, writing about his own experience of being led by the Lord His shepherd, writes: ‘*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,* ***I will fear no evil****, for you are with me’.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, during times of despair, depression and despondency, there is no need to fear the evil within our minds, or around us, because the Lord never leaves nor forsakes His children. He is always with us. It is this glorious truth and reality that brings great comfort, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The comfort**

Bunyan writes ‘*About the midst of this valley I perceived the mouth of hell to be, and it stood, also, hard by the wayside*”. Against these terrors, Christian’s sword was ineffective in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I remember during some of the dark times earlier this year that I could not even bring Scripture to mind in the night-time when my sleep was troubled. All I could do was pray and pray and pray. So it was for Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress. “*he was forced to put up his sword, and take himself to another weapon called ‘All-prayer’ (Eph 6:18). So he cried in my hearing “O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul*” (Ps 116:4). Here Bunyan makes reference to Ephesians 6:18 “*praying at all times in the Spirit, with* ***all prayer*** *and supplication*” when he names this weapon ‘All-prayer’. The Heidelberg Catechism LD 45, A118 reminds us that God commands us to pray for: “*Everything we need, spiritually and physically as embraced in the prayer Christ our Lord himself taught us*”.

In the Lord’s prayer we pray ‘*deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen*’. Prayer can be deeply comforting because it can remind us that we are not alone, and that God has all the power that we lack. Prayer does not necessarily immediately deliver us **out of** the darkness that can afflict our souls, but it does help to sustain us **through** the Valley of the Shadow of Death. At the time, we may not realise just how powerful prayer is because our suffering may continue for a prolonged time.

When the morning came, Christian looked back at what hazards he had gone through in the dark. He saw the ditch and the quag, the hobgoblins, satyrs and dragons, but ‘all afar off’. These dangers were behind him now and in the light of day they were much less terrifying than they had been in the night-time. Despite his fears and internal darkness, the Lord had guided Him safely along the narrow path through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Now the way ahead was actually ‘far more dangerous’ being ‘all along set so full of snares, traps, gins, and nets, full of pits, pitfalls, deep holed and shelving down’. **But now** Christian could see the way clearly and he quoted Job 29:3 “*his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness*”. David writes with godly confidence in Psalm 23 “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*”.

How do the Lord’s ‘rod’ and ‘staff’ provide comfort for the Christian pilgrim? It is helpful to know that the rod and the staff symbolise the covenant Lord God’s constant presence, protection, and guidance. The shepherd’s rod was also used for counting the sheep (Eze 20:37, also Lev 27:32). The rod is therefore also a symbol of certain possession by the Shepherd. Knowing that you belong to Jesus is deeply comforting. Remember that Jesus said (John 10:14-15) “*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep*”. In His perfect providence and faithful love, the Lord leads us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

We may experience sunshine there as Bunyan’s character Faithful did, or we may experience deep darkness, as Christian did. Remember, Jesus understands your fear and your weakness. For Him, the night was darker than it ever will be for you and me. **Not only** in Gethsemane, when His soul was sorrowful and troubled, even to death. **But also**, more so, at Calvary, when the anguish of His soul was reflected in Creation as the light failed for three hours during daytime (Luke 23:44-45). Jesus willingly laid down His life so that the pathway through the Valley of the Shadow of Death would lead to the Celestial City for Pilgrims who trust in Him alone for life, strength and hope.

For us, brothers and sisters, there is comfort in the cross. There is comfort in knowing that we are never alone, even though we may feel isolated and abandoned at times. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with words of comfort that reflect the gospel truth revealed in Scripture. The first question is “*What is your only comfort in life and in death?*”. The answer is given: “*That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the* **tyranny of the devil**. *(He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him*”). Tyranny is ‘cruel, unreasonable, or arbitrary use of power or control’. We sadly see clear examples of tyranny in a number of national governments in the world today. One of the ways that human governments tyrannise people is by cultivating fear in their populations.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death was a fearful place. Bunyan writes that ‘*at the end of the valley lay blood, bones, ashes, and mangled bodies of men, even of pilgrims that had gone this way formerly*’. Yet, for Christian, he came safely through. Through constant ‘all-prayer’ he was able to survive the night. By the light, he was able to walk the narrow pathway, continuing to avoid the pits, snares and traps. It was a troublesome trial – worse than his fight with Apollyon, yet He was comforted by the Lord who guided Him through.

How do the words of our text connect with your life? Are you, even now, walking through the valley of the shadow of death? Does depression, despair or despondency weigh heavily on your soul? Have you travelled this solitary path in the past, are you prepared for the possibility of this trial in the future?

If your faith and trust is in Christ, then you have no reason to fear evil because the Lord is with you. The rod and the staff, the protection, provision and guidance of Christ bring comfort to the troubled soul. Remember that the rod, used for counting the sheep, symbolises possession by the shepherd and belonging for the sheep. Today, if you are not your own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ then do not fear the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Today, if you do not belong to Christ, come to Him in repentance and faith while you yet have time.

AMEN.